

Final Report to the Northampton City Council on the Committee Study Request on the Local Economy (Issued on March 3, 2016)

City Council Committee on Community Resources
January 12, 2017

City Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra, Chair
City Councilor Dennis Bidwell, Vice-chair
City Councilor Maureen Carney
City Councilor Alisa Klein

OVERVIEW

In March, 2016, the City Council's Community Resources Committee was asked by the Council's President and Vice President to "study issues relative to the local economy, with a focus on businesses and workers in downtown Northampton and downtown Florence, for the purpose of identifying practical recommendations, if any, that the City Council could pursue to strengthen the local economy." As detailed in the Committee's July 18 interim report to the City Council, between March and June the Committee held four public forums to hear concerns and recommendations from a broad range of different constituencies, received reports and testimony from several members of the Mayor's staff, and received reports and commentary from various outside experts and groups as well.

At the Committee's meetings in September, October and November, the Committee deliberated on possible recommendations going forward. This report lays out those recommendations, which consist of:

- Seeking the cooperation of the Mayor in convening a forum
- Asking the Mayor to convene a task force
- Preparing a draft Council resolution and order
- Referral for consideration by other committees or agencies
- Public education efforts through newspaper opinions pieces, etc.

ARTS, DOWNTOWN EVENTS, PROMOTION

The Committee heard a great deal of commentary about the value of downtown events, the major contributions of artists and arts organizations to the City's vitality and economy, and the need for even more of these events, combined with even greater levels of promotion. Specific comments and recommendations expressed at the Committee's forums addressed topics such as: better promotion of Arts Night Out; development of a year-round downtown market in a permanent home; greater visibility on travel websites; more festivals and events at different locations downtown; more "pop-up" art in non-traditional locations; more arts venues.

Recognizing that the City and various non-profit arts organizations already provide a broad range of exciting and well-promoted events, and are already addressing many of the issues cited above, **the Committee recommends that, with the cooperation of the Mayor, the Committee join with other groups to host a one-time forum on the topics of downtown arts, events promotion, and how City government (i.e. City Council, the Mayor's Office, City staff and City committees and commissions) can potentially play an enhanced role in these realms. We would propose that a small working group, including one of our Committee members, organize a forum designed to include all arts-related organizations and organizations involved in downtown events planning and promotion.**

Possible topics for such a forum would be:

- Report from the Regional Tourism Council on their marketing efforts, with updated data on tourism-related spending
- Is there a need for a specific downtown marketing strategy?
- Are there revenue streams that could be dedicated to downtown marketing?
- Updates on downtown arts and events programming for 2017
- Review of arts programming and events planned for Florence Center
- Updates on mechanisms for coordinating the activities of all groups and their promotion
- Is there a master calendar for the planning of such events?
- Outreach for volunteers (for events, for board vacancies, etc.)
- Soliciting support of media in events promotion and volunteer recruitment
- What can the City Council and other City offices, committees and commissions do to be of additional help?

AT-RISK DOWNTOWN POPULATIONS AND “PANHANDLING”

The Committee heard a great deal of commentary from a broad range of downtown stakeholders over multiple meetings on the topic of the at-risk and marginalized downtown populations and solicitation for money, or “panhandling.” Many comments centered on the needs of the individuals, while many other comments were directed towards the perceived issues around actions, particularly solicitation for money. The complexity of this issue, and the extreme sensitivity required to address it, was made clear. As a committee, we are committed to the constitutionally-protected rights of all people in public spaces, and recognize the contributions of all to the fabric and vibrancy of our community. We recognize the impact the opioid crisis is having on the at-risk community, and how potential cuts to social services in federal and state funding may expand that community.

The Committee recommends that the Mayor convene a task force of city employees, representatives from social service, housing and advocacy organizations, downtown stakeholders, and a member of this Committee, to explore non-ordinance and non-punitive ways of addressing the needs of downtown at-risk populations and ways that expanded resources can be directed towards the agencies and organizations doing direct work with our at-risk populations.

Possible topics to be tackled by such a task force might include:

- Coordinating services to at-risk populations
- Additional resources for social service outreach professionals to increase their current work connecting personally with potentially at-risk individuals downtown
- Finding effective ways to facilitate contributions to agencies and organizations providing services to at-risk populations
 - Effective messaging
 - Use of new technologies

- Alternative donation locations
- What can the City Council and other City offices, committees and commissions do to be of additional help?

At an appropriate time, we would envision a City Council resolution in support of the approaches recommended by such a task force.

WORKER ISSUES

The Committee heard a great deal of commentary about working conditions facing some restaurant workers and some construction workers. Comments ranged from some employers not paying minimum wage, some workers not being paid for overtime, fear of retaliation by managers, and dangerous working conditions. The Committee also heard concerns about painting all employers, especially restaurant owners, with the same brush.

Councilors Klein and Carney have been meeting with the Mayor and the City Solicitor to develop City responses addressing wage theft related issues. **The Committee recommends that a draft Executive Order being prepared by the Mayor, and a proposed Council Resolution and Order, be brought to the Council.**

The Committee also expressed interest in supporting one or more resolutions supportive of state legislation aimed at strengthening the Attorney General's ability to enforce worker condition and wage-related statutes.

OVERALL STATE OF THE DOWNTOWN ECONOMY

The Committee heard considerable commentary expressing concerns about the state of Northampton's downtown economy, ranging from the number of retail vacancies and high rents on Main Street, to the effects of e-retail and the looming Springfield casino project. The Committee also heard appreciation for the Council's unwavering support of a single tax rate, for the generous support shown local non-profits by downtown businesses, and for the City's investment in improvements at the Academy of Music. (Pulaski Park hadn't yet opened at the time of these forums.)

The Committee also heard presentations from the City's Economic Development Director, from realtors, and from the Chamber of Commerce, all providing various data points and perspectives on the state of downtown.

The Committee recommends that it communicate its view of the state of Northampton's Downtown Economy in one or two opinion pieces to appear in the local press.

Perhaps one such piece might summarize the facts about downtown occupancy rates, public and private investments, recent successful business transitions, hotel/meal tax trends, etc. It might

also be appropriate in such a piece to highlight the Council's unanimous and consistent support for the Factor of One property tax.

Another opinion piece might cover such topics as:

- The fact that Northampton's downtown is the envy of almost all other cities our size
- The need to be aware of the looming impacts of the Springfield Casino and the ever-present effects of on-line commerce
- Innovative ways of encouraging "shop local"
- The need to support the Downtown Northampton Association.
- An encouragement to landlords to show restraint regarding rents (And a reminder that the Council is limited in doing more than that)
- A recognition that the vast majority of restaurants play by the rules and are worthy of our patronage
- Encourage more businesses to validate for the garage parking
- The importance of pressing for long-awaited commuter rail service

At the appropriate time, the Committee imagines a Council resolution supportive of measures to further strengthen an already strong and resilient downtown.

REFER TO TRANSPORTATION AND PARKING COMMISSION

A variety of issues came up that the Committee recommends be referred for study to the Transportation and Parking Commission, such as:

- **Request an update for North-South commuter rail**
- **Review of loading zone ordinance**
- **Review the parking ticket appeals process**
- **Explore whether the Council should seek a seat on the PVTA Board**

IN CONCLUSION

With submission of these recommendations, the Community Resources Committee concludes its study of the local economy pursuant to the March, 2016 Committee Study Request. However, the Committee looks forward to staying involved in all of these issues and making further recommendations in the months ahead, as necessary, to continue drawing attention to the need for a vibrant and healthy downtown Northampton and Florence Center economy.